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MEMORANDUM

April 25, 2011

To: Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group

From: Desert Tortoise Recovery Coordinator, Nevada Fish and Wildlife Office, Reno

Subject: March 10, 2011, Meeting Summary

The Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group (MOG) met on March 10, 2011, at the Springs Preserve in Las Vegas, Nevada. The meeting focused on discussion of 1) the status of the revised recovery plan, 2) structure and function of Recovery Implementation Teams (RITs), and 3) update on range-wide monitoring plan. Presentations from the meeting are posted at [http://www.fws.gov/nevada/desert\\_tortoise/dtro\\_meet\\_events.html](http://www.fws.gov/nevada/desert_tortoise/dtro_meet_events.html).

Final Desert Tortoise Recovery Plan

Ren Lohofener, USFWS Regional Director, welcomed meeting attendees and expressed his appreciation for seeing so many people in attendance. Ren explained that the revised Desert Tortoise Recovery Plan is on his desk and under review. He is seeking input on the draft that was released over 2 years ago. The main issues he is wrestling with concern whether the plan should more specifically address renewable energy projects.

USFWS seeks a recovery approach that is adaptive and allows for revisions as we learn more about the tortoise and its needs. Ren suggested that the Recovery Plan should be a “living document,” easily modified in the future. Ren asked for specific questions and input about the recovery plan, which resulted in his conclusion to sign the revised plan by May 1. Ren’s request for input from the audience generated the following:

- Request was made for the Revised Recovery Plan to include a clear and compelling explanation as to how the revised plan helps land managers comply with national laws and species recovery efforts. With numerous competing budget requests and priorities, land managers need clear, easy-to-understand, justification for recovery implementation in order to help secure necessary and related budget requests.
- Concerned with future budget implications and potential impacts on Recovery Plan efforts. Need to ensure that funds are made available from Congress for implementation.
- Repeated suggestions made to publish the Recovery Plan and to keep the options open for how to revise plan, but another suggestion was made that the Recovery Plan should be delayed until renewable-energy projects are more thoroughly addressed.

- Suggestions that the published Recovery Plan would help make a public statement as to the goals and strategies now to help influence development of current renewable-energy proposals.
- Nevada BLM would like to see plan published to help inform current projects.
- 1994 Recovery Plan is good and does not need to be revised, and the revised plan needs to address renewable energy issues.
- Make the plan an interactive, easy-to-consume document (web/knowledgebase ontology).

#### Highlights of changes between 2008 and 2011 Recovery Plan

Roy Averill-Murray, USFWS Desert Tortoise Recovery Coordinator, provided a brief overview of the changes between the 2008 and 2011 Revised Recovery Plan. Roy explained that recovery actions in the plan now are available for consideration by land managers, even before or during the RIT process. The RITs will help with long-term implementation and monitoring, but actions are presented for inter-agency use now. Questions and comments in response included:

- What are we going to do in the interim before the RITs can produce guidance? BLM needs guidance now to help with proposed renewable energy projects. Specifically, the RITs should prioritize mitigation measures for use on energy projects.
- Concern was expressed about available staff time to participate on RIT workgroups.
- Where are the recovery plan action items focused? Concern was expressed that if recovery is concentrated in the designated, existing tortoise conservation areas, that the importance of the interstitial spaces for recovery will be lost. *Proactive recovery is focused within the tortoise conservation areas. However, the interstitial spaces are also important to recovery within conservation areas (e.g., connectivity and gene flow), and actions within these spaces should be assessed relative to their impact to recovery.*
- A mapping layer that displays areas that are free of disease would be helpful. *This is logistically difficult because 1) multiple diseases may be of management or population relevance, 2) reliable diagnostic tests are not available for all relevant diseases, 3) results of visual health assessments or diagnostic tests provide only a snapshot in time, and 4) surveys to provide even this incomplete information are cost prohibitive.*
- What is the baseline for each recovery unit? How will this be determined and presented? *As described in the revised Plan, recovery criteria are based on population trends rather than absolute numbers. However, the starting population sizes for these trends are reported in the most recent range-wide monitoring reports, available at [http://www.fws.gov/nevada/desert\\_tortoise/dt\\_reports.html](http://www.fws.gov/nevada/desert_tortoise/dt_reports.html).*

#### Recovery Implementation Team Overview

Cat Darst, USFWS Desert Tortoise Recovery Biologist, provided an overview of the proposed Regional Implementation Team processes. Details about RIT organization, structure, and function were presented, and Cat explained that membership on each RIT will be limited to approximately 8-15 individuals representing both agencies and stakeholders and that interested

individuals could sign-up for the relevant RIT workgroup at the end of the meeting. Questions and comments in response included:

- There is a need for strong partnerships to make the RITs successful.
- If I participate, how will it benefit Section 7 consultation, and what are the benefits of participating? Need for reasonable assurance that process will benefit Section 7 and habitat conservation planning. *The benefits of participating include the centralized database of threats to the tortoise and recovery actions undertaken to ameliorate those threats, which will improve the accuracy of Section 7 consultations. Also, the development of science-based action plans by the RITs can be used in budgeting processes and mitigation discussions. Additionally, RITs will be tracking implementation of recovery actions, facilitating reporting for participating agencies and organizations.*
- Need to have sufficient progress on the ground to show that process is worthwhile.
- Budget delays will make RIT implementation difficult.
- RIT needs to be empowered to be the “advisory body” for all desert tortoise-related matters.
- Strong facilitation will be required for workgroups to function. *We will have several forms of facilitation, including a professional facilitator from CSU Sacramento’s Center for Collaborative Policy.*
- How will the RIT be the authoritative voice on recovery for the unit? Will RITs be providing recommendations to USFWS? *RIT 5-year actions plans will be direct products of the quantitative spatial decision support system being developed by the DTRO in collaboration with the University of Redlands, not products of consensus or majority rule of land managers or stakeholders. Decision-making by the RITs occurs primarily in developing annual work plans, in which participants determine on-the-ground priorities for implementing actions within the 5-year action plan each year (e.g., which stretches of highways or roads to specifically target for installation of tortoise-exclusion fencing) within their respective workgroup areas. These are more logistical issues than scientific issues, assuming that budgets are insufficient to do everything everywhere at once. Regular updates to all regions will occur on an on-going basis in conjunction with the annual report to the appropriate regional management group, MOG, and SAC.*
- Is the RIT process starting as a blank sheet of paper in terms of identifying and developing new action plans? *Recovery action plans will be based on output of the spatial decision support system (SDSS), which includes the best available scientific information.*
- How will unoccupied habitat be recovered as part of the process?
- Will RITs be presented with a summary of what has been achieved since the 1994 plan? What are the key actions that have already been implemented? How can we represent the

overall aggregate set of planned actions by RIT members and other actors? *As many previous recovery actions as possible has been incorporated into the SDSS, although help from the management agencies is needed to make this more complete.*

- Will multiple people from an entity be allowed to represent and participate on a RIT? *One participant from each agency office or stakeholder category may participate, although delegation may be possible if the nominate representative is unable to attend a meeting.*
- How will county governments be represented? What happens when counties need to send their policy agent and also have staff be part of the RIT? *Each county will be invited to participate; how and/or who participates is up to each county.*
- Need to have specific instructions and adequate time before each meeting in order to make the meetings productive. *We will be using sharepoint sites on deserttortoise.gov to facilitate RIT work in between meetings.*
- Need for explicit roles & responsibilities as to who from each organization is to provide input on SDSS. *Modification of the models contained within the SDSS will be based on scientific review and input, although questions or concerns about the underlying models may be raised by anyone. Likewise, anyone is encouraged to provide more recent geospatial data on threats or management actions to help ensure that the underlying data layers are as up-to-date as possible.*
- Need for SDSS model to grow through productive dialogue and input. What is the timeline and milestones for revising the SDSS? Need for a clear structure for improving the model. *The SDSS includes monitoring metrics for each recovery action. This information can be used over time to formally evaluate the models within the system during each revision cycle for the 5-Year Action Plans.*
- How will RITs secure sufficient funding for unfunded, but critical management actions? *The RITs will collaborate to secure funding for annual work plans.*
- What is the staff time commitment necessary to be on a RIT? Any estimate for # of hours necessary? *We estimate that participation on a RIT workgroup will require ~5-10% of the person's time, depending on travel. For many participants, some proportion of this workload is anticipated to be related to existing, rather than new, work.*
- How will future MOG meetings be tied to the RIT process? When is the next MOG meeting and what will the RIT reporting process be? *Regular updates to all regions will occur on an on-going basis in conjunction with the annual report to the appropriate regional management group, MOG, and SAC.*
- Has it been determined how to accept nominations from the identified groups to be on a RIT workgroup? *We have been soliciting nominations and interest in participation for several months via email and sign-up sheets.*

- Finding a true representative cross-section of participants will be difficult, especially within the stakeholder groups who each have individual interests and are not good representations of one another. *Stakeholder representatives appointed by FWS are encouraged to coordinate among their interest groups.*
- The RIT process seems repetitive of previously conducted efforts in the Mojave. *The models are new, the data (both threats data and data about where recovery actions have been thus far completed) are new, and the process (5-year actions plans as direct products of the quantitative spatial decision support system, not products of consensus or majority rule of land managers or stakeholders, followed by decision-making by the RITs in developing annual work plan, in which participants determine on-the-ground priorities for implementing actions within the five-year action plan each year within their respective workgroup areas) is new.*
- How will general public be involved? Need for semi-formal process for involving public user groups. Need a process by which the public can provide input to the RIT. *Various tools were described that will be made available on the internet (deserttortoise.gov) and which will provide opportunities for other interested individuals to follow RIT progress and provide input.*
- How will political reality be addressed? *We are hoping that by working together across jurisdictions and organizations that more will be accomplished than if individual entities were attempting to recovery the tortoise by themselves.*
- Need an agenda and homework to do as advance prep for RIT workshops. Send draft or immediate results to RITs ASAP, as opposed to 6-month lags in planning feedback. *This is our plan; we will be using sharepoint sites on deserttortoise.gov to facilitate this process.*

#### Update on Range-wide Monitoring Program

Linda Allison, USFWS Desert Tortoise Monitoring Coordinator, provided an overview of the range-wide monitoring program. Questions and comments in response included:

- What type of assistance is available for this monitoring?
- How are the data from the range-wide monitoring program going to be utilized by the RIT workgroups and the SDSS to evaluate the effectiveness of recovery actions?

Much of the discussion about the revised recovery plan and RITs will be incorporated into the planning and organization process for the RITs in the time between the MOG meeting and the release of the final revised recovery plan. In general, the RIT process is intended to be as flexible or adaptive as possible to address group-specific needs and to improve efficiency and productivity on an ongoing basis.